



## Coviello, Peter, ed., Walt Whitman's Memoranda During the War [review]

Ted Genoways

ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)  
ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

Copyright © 2005 Ted Genoways

---

### Recommended Citation

Genoways, Ted. "Coviello, Peter, ed., Walt Whitman's Memoranda During the War [review]." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 23 (Summer 2005), 61-63. <https://doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.1788>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Walt Whitman Quarterly Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

## REVIEWS

PETER COVIELLO, ED. *Walt Whitman's Memoranda During the War*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. liv + 176 pp.

Many people have questioned the wisdom of Oxford's new reprint series of individual editions of Whitman's important works. After all, many of those works are available online in e-text format or in facsimile on the *Walt Whitman Archive* ([www.whitmanarchive.org](http://www.whitmanarchive.org)). I, for one, like the idea of printed editions. For all the virtues of the web versions, it remains difficult to annotate the text, collate variants, or include auxiliary material in a simple, handy format. Unfortunately, as much as I like the *idea*, the execution of Peter Coviello's edition of *Memoranda During the War* is woefully inadequate. The annotations are scarce (fewer than twenty-five notes for the entire book and only two dealing with textual issues), there is no collation of variant readings at all, and the auxiliary material is an odd hodgepodge which seems intended to pad out the book rather than illuminate the basic text.

Stranger still, the introduction does little to situate the book historically or in terms of similar war narratives. The first six pages of the introduction, for example, recount Henry James's dislike for Hawthorne's "paleness of color and paucity of detail" (ix-x), then Coviello holds up Whitman as the antidote, in which "American grandeur [is] conceived as a function of its miraculous coherence" (xiv). Yet Coviello never mentions that Henry James was one of the first people to review Whitman's war writings (in *Drum-Taps*)—and initially among the harshest. Far from perceiving "miraculous coherence," James complained that "each line starts off by itself, in resolute independence of its companions without a visible goal." Nor does Coviello report that James later had a change of heart, writing a rave review of Whitman's war-time letters, and that he once passed an entire evening with Edith Wharton reading from the "great genius" Whitman. (When he read the song of the hermit thrush from "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," Wharton reported that James's "voice filled the hushed room like an organ adagio.")

When Coviello does address the historical moment of *Memoranda's* publication he affords it only two sentences, referring to *Memoranda* first as a "book published privately, in an edition of roughly 100, in 1876" (xv), then adding that long passages "first appeared in a series of newspaper articles Whitman published about the war in 1874, called 'Tis But Ten Years Since'" (xv-xvi). It's hard to know how to begin to enumerate the errors and misrepresentations implicit in those two seemingly innocuous sentences, yet they reveal a painful unawareness of recent scholarship on the part of the editor and a reckless disregard for fact-checking on the part of Oxford.

To take the second sentence first: many parts of *Memoranda*, in fact, did appear in six articles published under the title "'Tis But Ten Years Since" in the *New York Weekly Graphic* in 1874, but that is only roughly half of the

previously published material that eventually found its way into *Memoranda*. In fact, five articles published in the *New York Times* between February 1863 and March 1865 form an early source of *Memoranda*. Many passages from the *New York Times* articles were revised for the *New York Weekly Graphic*—often with significant variants. These variants, along with manuscript drafts and differences between the *Graphic* and *Memoranda*, were expertly collated by Floyd Stovall for the *Prose Works* in 1963. Unfortunately, Whitman's final two *New York Times* articles, "The Soldiers" and "The Last Hours of Congress," both published in March 1865, were not discovered until after Stovall's edition. No collation of those texts with the *Graphic*, *Memoranda*, or *Specimen Days* yet exists, and Coviello has not undertaken that task.

Ignoring the five relevant war-time texts is a serious omission, further exacerbated by the complete omission of any discussion of Whitman's attempt to publish a nascent version of *Memoranda* in October 1863 as *Memoranda of a Year* (1863). Roy P. Basler's 1962 edition of *Memoranda*—nowhere acknowledged in Coviello's edition—contains a ten-page discussion of the publication history of *Memoranda* from the failed attempt in 1863, to unused notebook entries that seem to have been intended for *Memoranda*, to its eventual publication. None of this history is included in Coviello's edition, nor does he seem to have consulted Joel Myerson's *Walt Whitman: A Descriptive Bibliography*, which more than a decade ago corrected many of the bibliographical errors repeated by Coviello. For example, Myerson has been able to fix the print run of *Memoranda* at close to 1,000—not the 100 copies cited by Coviello, based on an early estimate by Carolyn Wells and Alfred F. Goldsmith in their *Concise Bibliography of Walt Whitman*, published in 1922.

Likewise, the flat statement that *Memoranda* was published in 1876 is only partially elucidated when Coviello later explains that it was "entered into copyright in 1875, and published finally in 1876" (xlvi). This sidesteps the fact that all of the sheets of *Memoranda* were printed in 1875—which is why the title page (reproduced in facsimile by Coviello) carries the date "1875-'76" and why most Whitman scholars attach the publication date of 1875. When the book was finally bound in 1876, the cover was stamped in gold with the lines "WALT | WHITMAN'S | MEMORANDA | OF THE WAR | Written on the Spot | in 1863-'65." The problematic word is "OF." Did Whitman, between the printing of the pages in 1875 and the binding in 1876, change his mind about the title of the book? A quick review of his correspondence would suggest so. In six mentions of the book by its full title between 1876 and 1881, Whitman five times refers to it as "Memoranda of the War" and one time as "Memoranda of War" (see *Corr.*, 3:27, 44, 48, 92, and 7:61). Not only does Coviello not address this fact anywhere in the text, but the "facsimile" cover of his edition has been altered in PhotoShop so that "OF THE WAR" now reads "DURING THE WAR." Such a change is questionable even if it is noted, but making that change without noting it verges on willful deception.

This final example points out the complicity of those at Oxford University Press in many of this edition's shortcomings. Any writer can be forgiven for missing some recent scholarship, but why didn't the peer reviewers of this volume note these oversights? And, if they did, why did Oxford not insist on

changes? It is difficult to believe that a panel of Whitman experts would not have noticed any or all of the errors that have made their way into this published volume. Whatever the reason, Oxford is not producing the best possible editions for readers, and they are not responsibly protecting their author/editors from critical reviews. To ensure the reputation of this young series, Oxford must tighten the editorial control over its content and enforce higher standards.

In the meantime, the important project of creating a scholarly edition of *Memoranda* remains. Such an edition would feature an introduction attending to the historical and textual complexities of the book, collate all the published versions of the text, include full biographies of the historical figures (especially soldiers) mentioned, and include an appendix of relevant works. Coviello's edition contains Whitman's lecture "Death of Abraham Lincoln" (without mention that it contains revised passages from *Memoranda*, as ably demonstrated by Roy P. Basler), a selection of pre-war and war-time poems (selected because they are quoted in part in the introduction), and one of Whitman's war-time letters to the parents of Erastus B. Haskell. A much more useful appendix might include the first four articles from the "City Photographs" series, published in the *New York Leader* in 1862 and marking the earliest of Whitman's hospital writings; the five *New York Times* articles later incorporated into *Memoranda*; the six uncollected articles from the same period (also detailing the hospitals) that appeared in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, *Brooklyn Daily Union*, and the *New York Times*; the six articles as published in the *New York Weekly Graphic*; "Death of Abraham Lincoln" from *Collect*; and "Some War Memoranda" and "Last of the War Cases" from *November Boughs*.

A more ambitious edition might also explore the level of artistic rearrangement evidenced by the deviation from the strict chronology of Whitman's notebooks. Coviello hints at this, tantalizingly, when he notes that Whitman rearranged material to cover his absence from Washington (due to illness) from June 1864 through January 1865. However, this is only one of numerous examples of such creative and anachronistic reshuffling of the text. A thorough, systematic study of the historical sequence of the entries and how (and why) Whitman arranged them for publication would be a major contribution to our understanding of this central Civil War book.

Until then, professors interested in teaching *Memoranda* would be better advised to use the inexpensive facsimile reprint available from Applewood Books, supplemented by Kenneth M. Price's excellent archive of early versions of the text and Martin Murray's biographical entries on the soldiers mentioned (available online as *Whitman's Memory* on *The Classroom Electric* website [[www.classroomelectric.org](http://www.classroomelectric.org)]). For scholars, the best edition remains Roy P. Basler's facsimile edition—long out of print but readily available through online booksellers.

University of Virginia

TED GENOWAYS